



A JEWISH RESPONSE TO HUNGER

10495 Santa Monica Blvd, Suite 100
Los Angeles, CA 90025
Tel 310.442.0020 | Fax 310.442.0030
mazon.org | mazonmail@mazon.org

Dear Senator Liu,

Thank you for inviting me to join the Pathways to Resiliency Bus Tour. It was a privilege to share the experience with so many of our outstanding MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger's grantees – both participants on bus and the sites we visited along the way.

I am deeply encouraged by your political leadership around issues relating to hunger and poverty and the work of your outstanding staff during these critical times of struggles and recovery for many families and individuals. As we were traveling, I reflected on what we saw together and how powerfully it related to the Torah portion for the week, Parsha Re'eh.

The Parsha outlines the radical command to "release" our debtors and slaves every seventh year and to not only release them, but also ensure that they will not be left empty-handed. We are to do so joyfully and not begrudgingly and coming from a bigger and more holistic moral vision for society – one where everyone has enough. Charity, which today often translates into voluntary donations out of our overwhelming excesses, is simply not enough.

The Shulchan Aruch, the authoritative law code written by Yosef Karo in the 16th Century, further clarifies this obligation – "Everyone is obligated to give charity. Even people supported by charity must contribute from what they receive." The greater vision of "enough" means that even those who are poor would have enough to also give charity.

As our group discussed over and over again during the three days, hunger is not a matter of economics or logistics, but a matter of politics. That's why MAZON believes that advocacy must be at the core of our response to hunger. Charity - food drives, donations, pantries, together with the largest state-of-the-art food distribution centers - only account for, at most, 3 percent of the needs for food insecure households. The other 97% of the answer must include good jobs and responsive and responsible government programs like SNAP and school meal programs. Charity without advocacy is not enough. We need the political will AND the political leadership to end hunger.

So often though, the appeals from our pulpits and bema, public media, and even Sesame Street focus solely on food drives and donations.

At the four cities we visited, I saw both the poor and the decision-makers, like yourself, trapped in narrow realities with impossible choices. Choosing between

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receiving their meager Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits or their CalFresh because they cannot have both. Choosing between paying rent or buying food for their kids. Our elected officials forced into choosing between never voting for any reasonable tax increases or being targeted in the next election. Choosing between cutting benefits for seniors or disabled. These choices are not acceptable. Food, shelter, and adequate healthcare are not mutually exclusive needs. Electability and good governance should not be at odds with each other.

Along the way, I saw glimpses of what ought to be. MAZON is growing an effective advocacy movement through our grantees and a powerful political will through our synagogues. Together with elected leaders like you, and State Senator Loni Hancock who joined us during the tour, we are effecting changes with the bigger moral vision of what ought to be.

At the very last stop at River City Food Bank, I was deeply touched by Frank, the senior who was one of over 48,000 individuals RCFB served over the last year. What was most striking to me was not how he appreciated the services and help he is receiving, but more importantly what that support is empowering him to become. He wanted us to know that he wanted to be more than just a client or recipient of someone else's generosity. His story, as best as I can recall, is the perfect illustration of what the Torah teaches us about everyone having enough: "Not too long ago, I was waiting for my benefits to arrive in the mail. And because there was a nearly six-month backlog, it took quite a while for me to finally receive my accumulated benefit of \$96. I decided that I would use part of it to do a 'Spaghetti Party'. The neighbors, other seniors, and even the vice-mayor and city council members of West Sacramento came and ate. That's what I really want to do – to empower others."

I thank Frank for living out so joyfully the obligation and vision of "enough."
And I thank you for refusing to accept the false dichotomy of EITHER reelection OR governing.

I look forward to working together with elected officials like you to create a California where all will have "enough."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Samuel Chu', with a stylized, flowing script.

Samuel Chu
National Advocacy and Organizing
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger